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WHAT TO DO WITH CIVILIZATION. IT IS IMPOSSIBLE —GET RID OF IT

A SERMON
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It is Impossible—Get Rid of It.

Being the first in a series of six sermons which seek to set forth the present status and needs of civilization as viewed by six sets of counselors.

"It is Impossible—Get Rid of It."
"It is Bad—Moralize It."
"It is Ignorant, Vulgar—Teach, Cultivate It."
"It is Ugly—Beautify It."
"It is Poor—Materialize It."
"It is Material—Spiritualize It."

What To Do With Civilization.

It is Impossible—Get Rid of It.

WHERE are we in our civilization and which way are we going? We listen to those first who say that it is now in the worst stage thus far and will continue to decline from this time on to the end; that after about one thousand years of life all peoples take this disease, civilization, and never get back into health after getting it.

In proof of this we are reminded of our many ills; it is hard to find one in perfect health. We hide away in boxes; come out to see the sun and run back. We will not use our muscles; grind our food to a pulp and cook it. We are strangers to the magnetic touch of elemental things; deny ourselves the invigorating contacts we were meant to have. Made to live in one kind of world we have made out of it another kind in which we were not meant to live. Children of nature, we have left our mother and lost our birthright. We have misread the signs. All these things that we name so grandly, houses, clothes, private property, letters, printing, inventions and government, these, they urge, are not the marks of our growing life, but rather the warnings that the end is upon us.

Rousseau put it persuasively about 170 years ago. He said in substance that animals once lived together in the forest and man with them. Man had the advantage of having all the instincts by which they and he were governed exclusively. Man knew himself master. Physically man was in health, without the excesses, artificialities, orgies, transports of pas-

sion and strains of spirit which characterize our life today. He was physically fit, adaptable and resourceful as a child of nature, and not unhappy. His mind being dormant, he was saved the trouble that comes from mental activity. He was undisturbed about death, this knowledge being his first terrible acquisition. He was ignorant of vice, therefore had none. He was undisturbed about evil for he did not know of being good. His passions were always calm; his experience of love always blissful and beautiful, free from those disasters which follow in our civilization. He had pity, a natural endowment, which took the place of our laws, manners and codes of virtue. Here is man, nature's own child, without fixed habitation, speech, industry, war, connections or need of his fellows. He did not know his own children. Having no means of transmitting them, his inventions perished with him. Each generation was left free to begin unhampered just as each generation before had done.

Into this Eden came the serpent and the first revolution. The family was formed, and some one said, "This is mine," and the downward career had begun. Then they learned metal working and agriculture, both of which hastened the decline. These produced things to want, hence, the first rivalry and war. The need of some security and order in possession led to laws and government. Inequality was born. Then they went to the forbidden tree, the tree of knowledge, and the fall was complete. The eternal wisdom placed us here in happy ignorance but we would draw the veil; would uncover the

secrets of nature. Science and art came and as nations sought knowledge and beauty they weakened and fell before those uncontaminated with such things against nature. So the descending scale is: inequality, which produced riches; riches produced leisure; leisure produced luxury, knowledge and the fine arts. At last came printing which diffused to all, these forces of demoralization which before could be confined to a few.

Here is a clear diagnosis which we can understand. It says, "Your journey has brought you to a bewildering country of which you are not native. You cannot become acclimated and you are sick. Turn around and go back to the home-land you have left. Here again you may recover the health of which this disease, civilization, has robbed you."

Then came Carlyle, stern, rugged, denunciatory, with his indictment of things as they are. Civilization as a whole must go. By this time civilization, in addition to working metals, agriculture, science, art and letters, had invented a new burden, the machine for making innumerable things. He saw man robbed of his occupation in which he had been at once laborer, craftsman and artist; saw him left laborer alone. A new stage of decline had been reached, the industrial order, which increased the burdens of the common lot and widened the differences between man and man to a gulf. Civilization in the last stage seemed to him worse than any civilization that had been before. Man's habitation now, he said, not only breaks his body with excessive toil, which is bad enough, but, what is worse, the very

lamp of his life, his soul, goes out. He saw man, inspirited with the breath of God, living in a world in which he could not breathe. "That there should one man die ignorant, remain shrouded in darkness who might have had knowledge, this I call a tragedy though it happen twenty times a minute." To Carlyle civilization is cant and insincerity. True religion had declined. The last device, the machine, had brought overproduction and unemployment with their brood of human ills. To him civilization seemed as good as extinct, defunct. Too, he said it is sick, consumptive; might perhaps be galvanized into life for two centuries at most. Civilization is old clothes, rags and tatters. It should be burned with ceremony. As people here and there in the world have piled their cast-off things together and burned the pile as a religious rite, so, civilization should be given to the flames. Out of the ashes of the world phoenix might arise the new; out of the death-song of the old might arise the birth-song of the new. "Earth's Holocaust," this is the way out.

Other men have found civilization heavy upon them and suggested ways of escape. Perhaps we cannot get the whole vast machinery of things stopped or reversed so that we can all go back to primitive simplicity together; perhaps we cannot get rid of it altogether, but we can slip out from under and get away from it. Little groups can take themselves away and leave civilization to its own devices; refuse to continue to be its slaves as men are in general. So we have had companies getting away to establish little spots of reality and simplicity

where life as it should be may be lived. With various motives, economic, religious, philosophical, literary and artistic, all idealistic and earnest, groups all through the centuries have tried to get away and save their lives from the intolerable burden of unreality in things as they are. Three or four hundred such companies, we are told, have separated themselves in our own country.

Others said that the world is too much with us even in these little groups. Without tarrying for any, take your salvation into your own hands; go out alone and save your life. Thoreau was impressed with what civilization had strapped to our backs, taking all our strength to bear it and all our time to adjust and to renew it. He saw his neighbors going through the world with the weight of their inherited acres upon them; saw lives consumed in getting a larger box in which to live and in lifting the mortgage from their fields. He saw men robbed of life by their petty affairs. He alone of all the men in his town saw these things in true perspective and kept himself free for life's business as all men should do.

Civilization, he said, had made us too much dependent; made us lean on things and men. A man ought to stand on his own feet and be sufficient unto himself. The way out is simple; go out alone and be the natural man. He went out to demonstrate that the thing can be done; gives us all the details, the cost in time and labor. All our needs, he said, can be met with the labor of a few days, leaving us a large margin of freedom for life's real interests and all at a price which seems very cheap

to us today. As a squatter without rent on his neighbor's acres he demonstrated that while things are in the saddle they could not ride him. Things large and small, things of custom and convenience, he said no to them all. Even the mat given for his door must be refused and the stones collected thrown away to avoid even the beginnings and the appearance of evil. The way out is for each one by himself. Get away and be yourself; to the woods if you can.

Now come others in our own time saying that things have grown too much for us and we must escape for our lives. The way out is back to a golden age which at this distance seems as ideal and altogether lovely to them as the noble savage state, and life in the woods, seemed to others discouraged about the world. The way out is back to the walled town of the Middle Ages. Here kindred souls lived together in good fellowship; labor was a sacrement and possessions things of beauty. Here with real things shut in and civilization with most of her inventions shut out, life can become calm and satisfying again as of old.

Now today we are asking, which way and to what? Certainly at no time in generations have so many in the world been asking, "Where do we go from here?" What have these for us who say, "It is impossible; get rid of it?" If they cannot say positively which way we should take, it may be true nevertheless that they have something for us. It always helps to know even the ways not to take. Those who have tried impassable routes and posted warnings "No

Thoroughfare," "Dangerous Passing," "Private Road," have made their contribution to those who come after and seek a way.

It is conceivable that the kind of life we should have together is back of us. It might be that things were never better, man included, than in that fresh, bright morning of creation when everything was new, just as our houses are best when we first move into them and our clothes when they first come from the shop. It is conceivable that at some point along the way our human kind, for it has traveled a long way, might have discovered some way of taking life, in this kind of world, that was best, better than any way devised before or since. It might be that we have dropped something and we should go back and pick it up.

This possibility, that things were best and men were best when they were new, just as they left the hand of the great Artificer, has been always very attractive. Perhaps religions generally have been inclined to this view. Men who know most about such matters tell us now that things began in a rough, simple, humble way and were not very prepossessing at first. They tell us that the creative process worked a long time before it produced any being that we should like to recognize as even distantly related to us. It seems now that these records of beginnings are just beautiful stories, but things did not begin, in fact, in such perfect order. It seems clear now that the farther we go back in the history of things and men, the greater the disorder. Religions now have accepted this. The perfect start must be given up.

When we look into the life of this counselor who tells us that we must go back to the noble savage state, we find that he began life as a theologian. Later he became a freethinker but he kept a part of his theology. His perfect savage is just the first being in Eden, not an animal and not what we call man. Is the answer to this that no such being ever existed? Is the noble savage model to which we are asked to return, a myth? A being whose intelligence is dormant; is guided by instinct alone; cannot go wrong and knows no vice; knows no law and cannot sin; knows nothing about death because without thought to take it in; whose passions are always calm; has no speech, industry, inventions, habitation, connections or desire to harm his fellows; always starts new every generation, transmitting nothing and stranger to his own children, this being, whatever else it may be, is clearly not a man. It is a scientific description of an animal. Life has not passed to the human stage until it ceases to be directed by instinct alone; does know about death; does have speech and can go wrong. These are the marks by which we distinguish those who have crossed the line from animal to man.

Is there anything indicated here of reality to which we could return if we would, with profit? Take the most primitive life of man represented in the world, which must be far superior to that which has left no trace, take the best, uncontaminated with our civilization, with all the natural virtues attributed to it, would it be gain to go back to this? If we could turn the world back with a word, would anyone speak

the word? Is this just another dream of desire, a past golden age, with all the facts the other way? Is this the human race just wrong end to? The very impossibility of it makes it an attractive and harmless theory to hold. Theology is not alone in asking us to go back to pick up something we have dropped. Childhood is beautiful once but it can never come again. We have institutions now for those who always remain children, and second childhood is the mark of decrepitude and dissolution.

The family group and personal belongings, this counselor urges, mark the first stage in the descent. Their entrance proclaim that the primal order and innocency have departed. These are the twin evils: family lines and preference, with title running in one name. The way is clear. If civilization, which is decline, started at that point when men first began to say, "My family," and, "My goods," then, the way to recover what we have lost is to go back to that point and begin again. Go back to the communal life and continue therein without family lines and preferences, with title running in the name of all. Men did live this way at one time but they left it a long time ago. It was the early form of life in the mass which men climbed up out of and left behind. Men left it then for the same reason, no doubt, that all since have left it who have tried to revert to it and revive it, for the reason that it does not work. It proves a haven to the shiftless and a curb to the competent, both fatal to an on-going world. Has any group been able to escape the world and find life more abundant in the communal way without family

or property lines? The facts seem to say that our race marked time; had neither advance nor zest for the thing until the family group was separated from the mass, with a house, acre and belongings of its own. Far from being the evidence of our fall, family and divided property are the first indications of a race beginning to move. The family is the only unit thus far that can be built into a structure that will hold. It squares with the hardest facts and the noblest sentiments. Private property is the origin of law and government, as is complained, and liberty came with law.

And going out into the world alone, did man at any time along the whole human way run the race of life independent of his fellows? However swift, strong and selfsufficient, is life to the lone runner without contacts and relations? Do not the hard facts in this kind of world say that the victory is to those who can keep together? It is difficult to go out alone however simply one begins. Even Thoreau had to borrow an ax to begin his enterprise. Here was one who was bred to no profession and followed no trade; did not marry and lived alone; took no part in church or state to register his protest against both; said no by preference; had the everlasting nay for his rule of life in all its relations. Our code of life, we are admonished, should be such that it would be well for all men at once to follow the example we have set. Are we convinced that it would be well to thus deny all and slip away? Is this just a new asceticism, another kind of anchorite? Is this a new form of being at ease in Zion however the battle goes? Is

this treason to the post assigned us to hold, though our tastes be to desert and sleep? Stevenson called Thoreau a skulker. Yet, we would have him do it. It was such a novel thing to do and his record of the venture makes one of the best contributions to our literature. As an eccentricity of genius, we are all admiration for it. Weak in imitation it becomes fatal as a rule of life. One of the kind enriches the world. It would be an impossible world with millions of the kind.

Not so far back as the noble savage, not so far back as the first family and private property, was this point of highest excellence reached and the descent begun, say other counselors who urge that something has been lost. It was only a comparatively short time ago, in the Middle Ages, about the thirteenth century, that men found how to live to the best advantage in this kind of world. In the walled towns reality was reached and we should go back to them. Not real walls to be sure but barriers nevertheless; something to shut in a group, save it from wandering and save it from the confusing contacts with our present world; something exclusive, too, to shut out many mistaken evidences of progress which do not make for life. Conscious as we are of the exceeding multiplicity of our life; anxious as we are to find greater calm and order, can we believe that it is here? After we go carefully into the evidence that remains, can we believe that the common lot was better then and that, with all that we have done since, we have added nothing? Were men better in health and knowledge then? Was the average of men possessed

of greater liberties and more chances of life then than now? Is this just another idealization of an age departed, with its glory heightened by distance and its evils all forgotten? We do not forget that it was just a little after this time that a part of the world denied, as many are convinced, the true spiritual allegiance. The one church for all ceased, a little after this time, to command, and our civilization since has been the product of two spiritual powers, one true and the other false. As we examine the counselors who tell us that back there was the point of highest reach thus far, we find counselors interested, too, in showing us that this was the time when the world was under one true and holy church; counselors who find it easy to believe that there is no true way to go but back to the arms of the mother we have denied.

And burning the whole thing, Hawthorne's "Earth's Holocaust," is the only way out through the fire? We have burned more of our civilization in these last years than any one hopes to see burned again for a long time to come. We have tried burning it out. It licks up so much that we would keep, our treasures, and leaves so much that we would have consumed.

While these, who say get rid of it all or in part, counsel the impossible and urge us back to something that never was or cannot come again, yet, it is worth while for them to have their say. Although they do exaggerate our shortcomings and idealize the good old times, they are still wholesome reminders. It is easy to live the hot-house life and lose our ruggedness.

We can get too much luggage and miss the country we are traveling through, trying to keep it together. It is easy to get lost in the crowd; be on good terms and acquainted with everyone but ourselves. It is good to be reminded that we may have cast off much of the old time good along with the old time evil. There is much life back of us; all there is, in fact, is back of us. Wise people do look long-tried things over very carefully before throwing them away. We need to have all this said to us.

But after all this is said and full allowance made, the world, as it has grown to be, is all about us. However it was once, one cannot stand alone in our world. We are all mixed in together, closely interrelated and interdependent. We are attached to one another in a thousand ways of necessity and affection. The hard fact is getting home to us that all are endangered and made safe in each. We cannot get away, one of us or a company of us, if we would. Who would, to save his body, his nerves or his soul? Where could we go? Would it be manly and courageous? Who would go out even with choice, selected, kindred souls? What life has to be with so many of us in such a little world as ours, bad as it may be or as good as we can make it, we take our place, burdens and all; accept the terms; go down or go up together. Is not this saying, yea, to life?

Our life is complex, no doubt. That is the nature of life to get complex as it goes on. We do have hundreds of wants which men never had before. Other living beings about us have only five or six. We are crawling out a little all the time, getting new

powers and appreciations which call for new satisfactions. Complexity and many needs to be met; getting ourselves all bound in together, living with, on, by and through one another, our civilization is all this. It is a big, many-sided, even burdensome thing. It is about all our bodies can stand. Our minds can scarcely think through the maze of it and our spirits are troubled with the possibilities of it going wrong. We cannot escape it. It is our world. It is a great accumulation, the last stage of a long, long order pressed from the back. We have to go on with it. No one knows better than we where it is going. It may be that it needs a number of things done to it. Wild, spirited beast as it seems sometimes to be, carrying us where it will, it may be that we can be curb, rein and spur. The enchanted land of which we have been told may be ahead of us. If so, we are nearer to it than any generation has been before.